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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/11/2024
TAGS: [PREL](#) [SY](#) [AU](#)
SUBJECT: SYRIAN EXILE POLITICIAN ON PLANS FOR NEW PARTY,
PARLIAMENT IN EXILE

Classified By: CDA Dean Yap. Reason: 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary and Action Request. A Syrian exile politician resident in Vienna, Marwan Hammoud, briefed Econ/Pol Counselor March 10 on plans to establish a new, democratic Syrian opposition party that would operate both in Syria and abroad and on plans by a coalition of parties to establish a centrist parliament- and government-in-exile. The "center-left" political party envisaged would promote economic and political reform and building a Syrian identity. The parliament- and government-in-exile allegedly brings together five centrist groups -- excluding both the extreme left and Islamist groups. Post has had intermittent mid-level contact with Hammoud in the past but has no way of assessing his credibility. In the course of the conversation, Hammoud openly sought USG political and/or material support for the plans he outlined. Washington guidance on further contact with Hammoud is requested. End Summary and Action Request.

¶2. (C) Marwan Hammoud, "Coordinator" of the Salvation and National Reconciliation Front in Syria SNRFS has been an intermittent Embassy contact for several years. In previous contacts, Hammoud has briefed Embassy officers on his own organization's political program and plans, and has offered a limited description of its presence and activities in Syria. In addition, he has provided some information on plans in the broader Syrian exile political community. Though Hammoud has credentials as an exile politician dating back at least several years, the Embassy cannot evaluate his role or credibility.

New Opposition Party

¶3. (C) Hammoud met March 10 with Econ/Pol Counselor to brief on the results of a February meeting in Bonn, at which 15 representatives of the Front and other organizations planned the establishment of a new political party and a linked human rights organization. This followed an October 2008 meeting and is to be a prelude to another, larger meeting, likely in May, that would formally establish the party.

¶4. (C) Describing the new party as a center-left grouping, Hammoud did not provide details on the other organizations cooperating with the SNRFS. He did emphasize that the party was multi-ethnic/multi-religious in character and rejected participation by Islamists or persons from the far-left. The party rejected pan-Arabism or ethnic (Kurdish) or confessional (Alaouite Sunni or Christian) politics as a basis for its program, which Hammoud stressed was focused on economic and political reform and building a Syrian national identity. He asserted that the party had some 300-400 "members" outside Syria and could count on up to 11-12,000 supporters in Syria. Moreover, up to 10-15% of the

population would be passive supporters of the new party. These included, he claimed, members of the armed services and police, and also persons who were formal members of the Baath party.

15. (C) The Syrian and exile branches of the SNRFS, the basis of the new party, have limited contact, Hammoud acknowledged. Some party supporters in the Gulf region are able to visit Syria regularly and carry messages; the party has also sometimes smuggled people into Syria via Cyprus, Hammoud claimed. He himself had not been in Syria for 21 years and would be arrested if he attempted to enter the country.

Parliament- and Government-in-Exile

16. (C) In addition to the project above, Hammoud said the Front is working on a second track with four other organizations to create a parliament-in-exile (tentatively named the "Syrian Patriotic Association") that would, in turn, elect a government-in-exile and draft a new Syrian constitution. The other organizations are: the National Salvation Front, headed by former Vice-President Khaddam; the National Union, headed by Rifaat Al Asad; the Damascus Declaration organization; and an otherwise unidentified Kurdish group. The five are in frequent consultation and are planning a congress in the late summer or early fall. Hammoud described the decision of the five to break with non-democratic opposition groups, most importantly the Muslim Brotherhood, as the key step in facilitating the present cooperation among the five.

17. (C) All together, these groups count an exile membership of a few thousand, Hammoud thought. He claimed, though, that they could count on the passive support of up to two-thirds of the Syrian population -- whereas the government enjoyed support from no more than 10-15% of the population.

Bio Note

18. (C) Hammoud reported that he left Syria to study medicine in the former Yugoslavia in 1983, where he was drawn into opposition politics -- initially as a member of the Communist Party. In 1986, however, he abandoned the Communists for a forerunner to the SNRFS. He did not complete his degree. In Yugoslavia he also became acquainted with the then-opposition figure Zoran Djindjic (later assassinated), whom he sees as a political role model. Hammoud left Yugoslavia for Austria in 1995. Details of his past political activity are not known to us, but we note an internet report of his attendance at a 2006 London meeting of Syrian exiles at which he broke with ex-Vice President Khaddam's National Salvation Front because of its non-democratic internal proceedings. Hammoud speaks little or no English; our contact with him is in German.
YAP